



Government's Economic Performance Fosters Trust in Government in China: Assessing the Moderating Effect of Respect for Authority

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Abstract

The high level of trust in government in China has been attributed to the Chinese government's success in economic development. However, the increased public demand in China in recent years has made the public less likely to focus on the government's economic performance, which inspired us to explore the correlation between government's economic performance and trust in government. Based on the Asian Barometer Survey, this study examines the relationship between the government's economic performance and trust in government in China. The findings suggest that good economic performance by the government was positively associated with a high level of trust in government. High respect for authority was not only positively associated with trust in government but also weakened the relationship between the government's economic performance and trust in government. This study provides evidence that although the conventional concept of respect for authority may positively predict trust in government, it will weaken the effects of good economic performance by the government on trust in government. The results provide reference for governments in contexts similar to that in China seeking to improve their reputations.

Keywords Trust in government · Government's economic performance · Respect for authority · China

1 Introduction

Trust in government refers to people's belief and confidence in and expectations of government (Chen 2017a, b; Fu 2017; Huang 2018). This trust is based on the government's performance (Zhai 2018, 2020; Han et al. 2019). Governments with higher public trust

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levels can not only more effectively cope with crises caused by natural disasters and epidemics but also promote new technology, such as e-services (Lee 2009; Belanche et al. 2012; Su et al. 2017), which has led researchers to explore the factors that can predict trust in government to improve the trust level. However, worldwide, public trust in government has dropped rapidly over the past few decades (Córdova and Layton 2015). Even though in China, trust in the local and central governments has been at a high level (Liu and Raine 2015; Zhen et al. 2017), the public's expectations of the government have also experienced a significant rise (Wu et al. 2019). Considering the growing global influence of China (Han et al. 2017), exploring the factor and mechanism of trust in the Chinese government might have both theoretical value and practical implications for other countries.

Government trust is affected by multiple factors (Christensen and Læg Reid 2005; Kim 2010, Chen 2017a, b; Fu 2017). Excellent economic performance by the government has been regarded as the major source of trust in government in China considering the authoritarian context (Cui et al. 2014; Liu and Raine 2015). However, the effect of the government's economic performance on trust in government is lower now than in recent decades. Previous studies have proposed that several potential risk factors originating from high economic growth, such as income inequality (Su et al. 2018; Koh et al. 2020) and environmental problems (Long and Ji 2019; Wang and Jiang 2019), may reduce the positive effects of government's economic performance on trust in government. Generally, the growing increase in public demand along with Chinese economic development has resulted in changes in public perception and is regarded as the dominant factor in reducing the effects of government's economic performance on trust in government (Guan 2018; Yap 2018; Zhai 2018). The development of social media has made it easier for the public to express government-related opinions and obtain relevant information (Zhang et al. 2013). The needs of the public have been become increasingly diversified. Chinese citizens have been increasingly regarding the government as a service provider, valuing social justice and government transparency over economic outcomes delivered by the government (Wang and You 2016; Han et al. 2017; Wu et al. 2017a, b; Zhou and Jin 2018; Li and Chen 2020). When the public's needs are not satisfied, the public might become dissatisfied with the government's performance. The changes in public perception do not mean the end of conventional concepts about the government. In China, the politically related conventional concept of respect for authority still has a significant impact on trust in government (Lingle 2007; Han 2015; He et al. 2017; Laufer et al. 2018). There are clues suggesting that in societies with high respect for authority, people are prone to trust in government without carefully evaluating the government's performance (Stalnaker 2013; Chen 2017a, b). However, does respect for authority also influence the relationship between government's performance and trust in government? This study examined the relationship between economic performance and trust in government. Moreover, the effect of respect for authority on the relationship between economic performance and trust in government was analyzed. National social survey (the Asian Barometer Survey) data were analyzed to provide robust results.

2 Literature Review and Hypothesis Development

2.1 Economic Performance and Trust in Government

Government's economic performance in the Chinese context mainly refers to government's performance in maintaining a good economy at the both national level and individual level (Sun and Wang 2012; Liu and Raine 2015). A good economy at the national level refers to sustained economic growth and, at an individual level, refers to an increase in disposable income (Chen 2017a, b; Li and Wu 2018). Chinese citizens evaluate the government's national-level economic performance mainly via media. Currently, the Chinese government's national level economic performance is reported in both official media and unofficial media (Chen and Sun 2019). The official media tend to report more on the positive performance of the government and less on the negative performance (Zhu et al. 2017; Kang and Zhu 2020). In reporting economic performance, Chinese official media are generally prone to highlighting positive governmental actions and hypothetical futures, causing citizens to perceive an excellent economic performance by the government at the national level (Kuang 2020; Wang 2020). Due to the media censoring by Chinese authorities (Han 2015; Wu and Wilkes 2017; You and Wang 2019), negative news reports of the government's performance by unofficial media are supervised in order to maintain social stability. Even if the negative reports by unofficial media about the problems related to government's economic performance may reduce trust in government (Huang 2017; Shao and Liu 2018; Tang and Huhe 2018; Zhou et al. 2019), this effect is limited when considering the weaker impact of unofficial media than of official media. Chinese citizens evaluate government's economic performance at the individual level based on the perceived performance of the government in their daily lives. For instance, they may evaluate economic performance by judging whether their economic and material needs are met (Hakhverdian and Mayne 2012; Edlund and Lindh 2013) or whether their disposable income is growing (Chen 2017a, b). Thus, citizens' perceptions of government's performance at an individual level might be more objective than that at the national level.

The positive relationship between the government's economic performance and trust in government has been suggested by previous study (Sun and Wang 2012; Cui et al. 2014; Liu and Raine 2015). Such a mechanism could be clarified by analyzing the effects government's economic performance at the national level and individual level. Media coverage about good economic conditions could strengthen citizens' future orientation (Liu and Raine 2015), making them believe that the state of things will be better tomorrow. The contribution of government in maintaining a good state of the economy has also been stressed, which leads citizens to believe that the government is able to improve the economic state (Kuang 2020; Wang 2020), in turn making them more likely to trust in government. Evidence on the positive evaluation of state economic growth and high levels of trust in government competence support this point (Han and Yan 2019; Lu et al. 2019). At the individual level, the economic self-interest theory also proposes that the level of trust in the government is determined by economic outcomes (Li and Wu 2018), an effect that is particularly evident in China (Li and Wu 2018). Specifically, Liu and Raine (2015) proposed that in China, the excellent economic performance has increased the material wealth of most residents, leading people to believe that the Chinese government can provide growth in personal wealth. Zhou (2020) also confirmed that becoming financially better off has made Chinese citizens more likely to

trust in government. Given the above context, we analyze the relationship between economic performance and trust in government. The following hypotheses are proposed.

Hypothesis 1 Economic performance is positively associated with trust in government.

Hypothesis 1a Economic performance at the national level is positively associated with trust in government.

Hypothesis 1b Economic performance at the individual level is positively associated with trust in government.

2.2 The Moderating Role of Respect for Authority

Respect for authority has been defined as people's recognition of the status and ability of authority (Ma and Wang 2014; Chien 2016; Yang 2017). Stalnaker (2013), believed that the Chinese respect for authority originated in Confucianism, which has been accepted and advocated by Chinese state governors since the establishment of the authoritarian political system in the Han Dynasty. The respect for authority stresses a harmonious, hierarchical order and loyalty to the governor (Dong and Kübler 2017). More specifically, this value system encourages citizens to trust in government, follow the government's decisions and allow the government to manage and allocate resources to ensure efficiency (Wu and Zhang 2013; Ma and Wang 2014). Current Chinese citizens generally accept that the government can protect collective interests and deserves to be trusted (Zhai 2016). Thus, based on the analysis above, the following can be proposed:

Hypothesis 2 Respect for authority is positively associated with trust in government.

Current evidence suggests that respect for authority may weaken the relationship between government's economic performance and trust in government. First, Stalnaker (2013) confirmed that in China, the respect for authority signals that government's positive performance should receive greater attention. According to this view, without careful evaluations, people with high respect for authority might trust in government in relation to the government's positive economic performance. In this condition, changes in the government's economic performance may not easily influence trust in government. For instance, evidence shows that Chinese economic development has not been perfect and has given rise to many problems such as increasing inequality (Koh et al. 2020). However, respect for authority makes people more likely to perceive the performance of Chinese government in a favorable light, such as its ability to promote economic growth to meet public demand, and therefore continue to trust in government (He et al. 2012; Han et al. 2017; Wu, et al. 2017a, b). Second, given that trust in the governor is seen as a form of trust in government (Ma and Wang 2014), respect for authority stresses loyalty to the governor (Dong and Kübler 2017), causing people to instinctively trust in government but neglect the government's performance, including economic performance, which is the dominant predictor of political trust proposed in previous research (Mishler and Richard 2010). Evidence shows that in rural elections, those who have strong "traditional authority orientation" and support respect for authority are more likely to trust in the local governor without analyzing his or her performance, including economic performance (Ma and Wang 2014). In that case, changes in the government's economic

performance could hardly influence trust in government. Therefore, we assumed that for individuals with high respect for authority, the relationship between the government's economic performance and trust in government might be weaker. According to the analysis above, we hypothesize the following. The overall model is shown in Fig. 1.

Hypothesis 3 Respect for authority negatively moderates the relationship between the government's economic performance and trust in government: the higher the respect for authority, the weaker the relationship between the government's economic performance and trust in government.

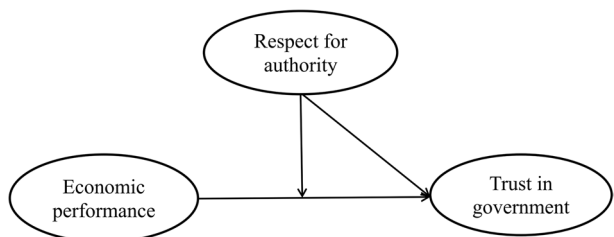
3 Methods

3.1 Data and Sample

We used the Asian Barometer Survey data in this study. The data are available via its official website (<https://www.asianbarometer.org/>). Launched by the Center for East Asia Democratic Studies at National Taiwan University, the Asian Barometer Survey investigates issues such as political values, democracy, and governance in several Asian countries and regions, including mainland China, South Korea and Japan. Four waves of surveys have been conducted to date. Currently, the most recent data are from the 2016 survey wave. To guarantee reliability, the Asian Barometer Survey recruits professional workers for its well-trained interviewers, designers and supervisors.

The Asian Barometer Survey collected the samples through standard questionnaire instruments. Therefore, we used the data from wave four for mainland China. By using the probability proportional to size (PPS) sampling method, the survey involved participants from 23 provinces and 4 autonomous regions of China. Thus, it provides representative national data. The participants underwent face-to-face interviews in their homes or workplaces. Local language translation was offered to ensure the fluency of communication, and the interviewers recorded the answers. Prior to the answers of the items related to trust in government, this study included 3665 valid answers. There were more female participants than male participants (49% male and 51% female). The mean age of the participants was 49.3 years. The average education level, which was analyzed as a dummy variable, corresponded to a level above secondary school. Of the participants, 34% were from urban areas, and 66% were from rural areas.

Fig. 1 Overall research model



3.2 Measures

3.2.1 Dependent Variable

Government trust level was measured by central government trust level and local government trust level as suggested in a previous study (Chen 2017a, b; Dong and Kübler 2017). In Asian Barometer surveys, participants were asked the following two questions: (1) To what degree do you trust in national government? (2) To what degree do you trust in local government? The mean value of the two items was used to measure the trust in government, and this study used a five-point Likert scale to show the level of government trust (5 = “a great deal of trust”; 4 = “quite a lot of trust”; 3 = “neither trust nor distrust”; 2 = “not very much trust”; 1 = “no trust at all”). Higher scores indicated higher levels of trust.

3.2.2 Independent Variables

Economic performance was measured by six items that have been well tested in the Asian Barometer survey and other surveys (Kim 2010; Chen 2017a, b). Economic performance was thus measured by the following questions: (1) How would you rate the overall economic condition of our country today? (2) How would you describe the change in the economic condition of our country over the last few years? (3) What do you think will be the state of our country’s economic condition a few years from now? (4) How do you rate the economic situation of your family today? (5) How would you compare the current economic condition of your family with what it was a few years ago? (6) What do you think the economic situation of your family will be a few years from now? A five-point Likert scale was applied to measure the government’s economic performance items (5 = “very good”; 1 = “very bad”). Higher scores indicated better economic performance. The first three items measured economic performance at the national level, and the last three items measured economic performance at the individual level. Cronbach’s α coefficients of national-level economic performance, individual-level economic performance and overall economic performance were 0.71, 0.64 and 0.72, respectively.

3.2.3 Moderator

Respect for authority is regarded as a moderator in this study, and the items related to respect for authority have also been well tested in the Asian Barometer survey and other surveys (Ma and Wang 2014). Respect for authority was measured by the mean of the agreement with the following eight items: (1) Government leaders are like the head of a family; we should all follow their decisions. (2) The government should decide whether certain ideas should be allowed to be discussed in society. (3) The harmony of the community will be disrupted if people organize many groups. (4) When judges decide important cases, they should accept the view of the executive branch. (5) If the government is constantly checked by the legislature, it cannot possibly accomplish great things. (6) If we have political leaders who are morally upright, we can let them decide everything. (7) If people have too many different ways of thinking, society will be chaotic. (8) When the country is facing a difficult situation, it is ok for the government to

disregard the law in order to deal with the situation. We used a five-point Likert scale to describe the attitude (5 = "strongly agree"; 1 = "strongly disagree"). Higher scores indicated greater identification with respect for authority. Cronbach's α coefficients of this scale was 0.86.

3.2.4 Control Variables

Prior studies have confirmed that demographic characters influence trust in government (Christensen and Lægread 2005; Chen 2017a, b). Four demographic variables, namely, gender, age, education level and region, were controlled as suggested by previous studies. Age was assigned to the actual age, while the other three variables were coded as dummy variables (0 = women and 1 = men for gender; 0 = below secondary school and 1 = above secondary school for education level; and 0 = rural and 1 = urban for region).

3.3 Analysis

STATA 14 software was used in analysis. We performed a correlation analysis between the study variables and then entered the variables into the regression models. In testing the hypotheses, an ordinary least squares regression analysis was conducted. The respondents with invalid answers to too many questions were deleted. Specifically, this study employed seven rounds of regressions to test our hypotheses after adding demographic variables as control variables. In models 1, 2, 3 and 4, we investigated the relationship between economic performance, respect for authority and trust in government. In models 5, 6 and 7, the moderating effects of respect for authority were examined.

4 Results

Table 1 shows the means, standard deviations, and zero-order correlations among the variables. Economic performance was moderately positively associated with trust in government ($r=0.29$, $p<0.01$). Economic performance at the national level and individual level was moderately positively associated with trust in government ($r=0.32$, $p<0.01$ and $r=0.16$, $p<0.01$, respectively). Respect for authority was moderately positively associated with trust in government ($r=0.29$, $p<0.01$). Considering that the correlations between government's performance, respect for authority and trust in government were above a moderate level, we conducted a regression analysis, a shown in Table 2.

Table 1 Means, standard deviations, and correlations among study variables

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4
1. National level performance	4.02	0.69				
2. Individual level performance	3.62	0.63	0.37**			
3. Economic performance	3.62	0.44	0.85**	0.81**		
4. Respect for authority	3.23	0.64	0.23**	0.06**	0.20**	
5. Trust in government	3.83	0.66	0.32**	0.16**	0.29**	0.29**

** $p<0.01$

* $p<0.05$

Table 2 Regression results on trust in government

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6	Model 7
Control variables							
Gender	0.02(0.02)	0.02(0.02)	0.02(0.02)	0.02(0.02)	0.03(0.02)	0.02(0.02)	0.03(0.02)
Age	0.003 ^{***} (0.02)	0.01 ^{***} (0.01)	0.004 ^{***} (0.01)	0.004 ^{***} (0.01)	0.002(0.02)	0.003 ^{***} (0.02)	0.002(0.01)
Education level	0.03(0.02)	-0.02(0.03)	-0.001(0.03)	0.08 ^{**} (0.03)	0.07 [*] (0.02)	0.04(0.02)	0.04(0.03)
Region	-0.05(0.02)	-0.09 ^{***} (0.02)	-0.06 [*] (0.03)	-0.02(0.03)	0.01(0.02)	-0.04(0.02)	-0.01(0.02)
Independent variables							
National level	0.26 ^{***} (0.02)				0.22 ^{***} (0.02)		
Individual level		0.16 ^{***} (0.02)				0.14 ^{***} (0.02)	
Economic performance							
Respect for authority			0.31 ^{***} (0.02)	0.29 ^{***} (0.02)	0.23 ^{***} (0.02)	0.25 ^{***} (0.02)	0.27 ^{***} (0.02)
Interact 1					-0.04(0.02)		
Interact 2						-0.08 ^{**} (0.03)	
Interact 3							-0.07 [*] (0.03)
R ²	0.11	0.05	0.09	0.09	0.14	0.10	0.13

Standard errors are in parentheses;

Interact 1, Interact 2 and Interact 3 refer to economic performance at the national level^{*}respect for authority, economic performance at the individual level^{*}respect for authority and economic performance^{*}respect for authority, respectively

^{***} $p < 0.001$

^{**} $p < 0.01$

^{*} $p < 0.05$

Table 2 displays the ordinary least squares regression results of the variables. When the participants' gender, age, education level and region were controlled for, economic performance was positively associated with trust in government ($\beta=0.31$, $p<0.001$). Economic performance at both the national level and individual level was positively associated with trust in government ($\beta=0.26$, $p<0.001$ and $\beta=0.16$, $p<0.001$, respectively). Respect for authority was positively associated with trust in government ($\beta=0.29$, $p<0.001$). The interaction between economic performance and respect for authority was negatively associated with trust in government ($\beta=-0.07$, $p<0.05$).

As shown in Fig. 2, a simple slope test revealed the interaction between economic performance and respect for authority. The correlation between economic performance and respect for authority was spilt into two levels (high and low). The line of low respect for authority was clearly steeper. The highest level of trust in government was found when respect for authority was lower while economic performance was higher. Considering the positive relationship between economic performance and trust in government, the negative effect of respect for authority on the economic performance and the trust in government was examined.

Overall, all hypotheses of our study were supported. Both economic performance and respect for authority were positively associated with trust in government. Respect for authority was also found to negatively moderate the relationship between economic performance and trust in government, which means that high respect for authority weakens the positive relationship between economic performance and trust in government.

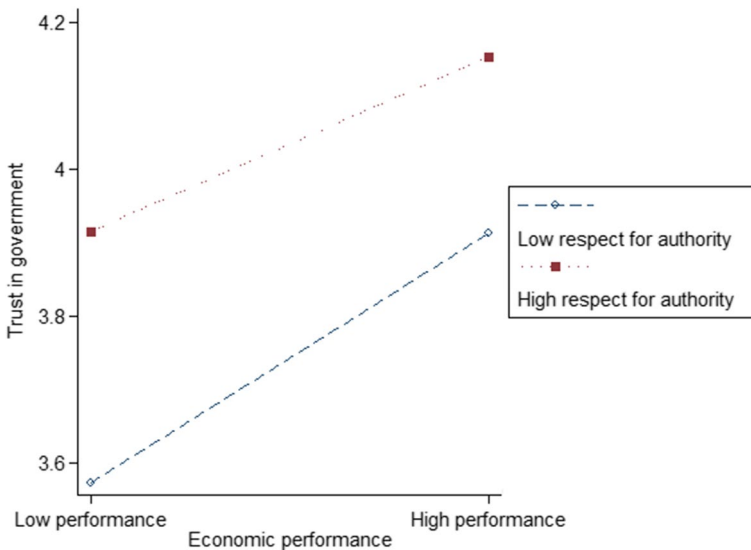


Fig. 2 Moderation of economic performance–trust in government relationship by respect for authority

5 Discussion

Our finding of the relationship between the government's economic performance and trust in government is consistent with previous studies (Kim 2010; Chen, 2017a, b). This study summarizes two key indicators of the government's economic performance in the Chinese context, namely, national-level economic performance and individual-level economic performance. Considering the strong influence of media, citizens who are more likely to identify the capability of government based on its economic achievement and proposed future targets are more likely to trust in government (Kuang 2020; Wang 2020). The perceived benefits of citizens might explain the relationship between government's performance and trust in government. People are likely to trust those who will bring benefits to themselves (Lumineau, 2014). Evidence implies that good economic performance by the government brings benefits for the public. Li and Wu (2018) used the theory of economic self-interest to demonstrate that those who have benefited from the government are likely to trust in government, indicating that the Chinese economic growth has led more people to trust government owing to the benefits they have received.

As respect for authority is considered to have a strong influence in China (Zhai 2016), the potential positive effects of respect for authority also help to explain the good reputation of the Chinese government, as prior studies have mentioned (Yang 2017; Zhen et al. 2017). In many Western countries, good government performance fosters a higher level of trust in the government (Boda and Medve-Bálint 2014). However, respect for authority might be an endogenous Chinese factor in explaining the decline in trust in the Chinese government (Zhang et al. 2014). The effects of respect of authority on the relationship between the government's economic performance and trust in government might be explained by two proposed factors: overestimating the government's performance and trusting in the governor instinctively. The former might make the public focus on the government's good performance in the economy but ignore its poor performance; the latter leads the public to trust in officials without thinking about their performance. Both factors indicate that the influence of respect for authority might makes the public less likely to carefully evaluate the government's economic performance in judging the reliability of the government in China, which weakens the relationship between respect for authority and trust in government.

This study might help to explain the decline of trust in government in China, a country whose government has a good reputation among the public. As the government's economic performance was regarded the dominant predictor of high level of trust in government (Cui et al. 2014; Liu and Raine 2015), we suggest that respect for authority might weaken the relationship between the government's economic performance and trust in government, in which good economic performance is less likely to improve the level of trust in government. The effects of respect for authority might resemble those of democratic concepts, which have been described in several studies (Guan 2018; Yap 2018; Zhai 2018). The research results provide a reference for countries that have similar situations to that in China that are seeking to improve the level of trust in government.

This study has the following limitations. First, based on national social survey data, we explored several relevant factors of the public's trust in the Chinese government. Due to the limitations of our data, causal relationships among the variables could not be established. We hope in future studies to analyze the mechanism of public trust in government with a causal inference. Second, a Chinese sample was used to demonstrate the effects of respect for authority on the relationship between the government's economic performance and trust

in government. The results may be more valuable to countries with cultural similarities to China, such as Japan and South Korea, than to countries with dissimilar cultures (Wang 2016). For example, authority is closely linked to a repressive context in some countries (Ayanian and Tausch 2016). On the contrary, in China, respect for authority advocates a harmonious, differentiated and hierarchical order (Stalnaker 2013). Whether the conclusions are still applicable to other countries remains an open question. Cross-cultural and cross-national studies are needed to determine whether the findings are applicable to countries whose cultural characteristics are different from China's cultural characteristics.

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Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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